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FROM THE SURGEON GENERAL OF THE U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE

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Strategies for Saving Young Lives

Each year, almost 24,000 lives are lost because Americans persist in drinking and driving. To put this national tragedy in perspective, let me point out that about 57,000 Americans were killed in Vietnam. By mixing alcohol and driving, we come close to recreating the carnage of Vietnam on our highways every two years!

The picture becomes even more grim when we consider that approximately 45 percent of those killed in alcohol-related crashes are young people between the ages of 16 and 24. Clearly, we need to do a better job of communicating the grisly facts about drinking and driving to young people.

Experts at my Surgeon General's Workshop on Drunken Driving, last December, noted that young people tend to learn about alcohol use in TV, radio and magazine advertising and that alcoholic beverage advertising gives a one-sided view, glamorizing alcohol use without providing information about the serious consequences of drinking. If the volume of youthful blood spilled on our highways each year is any indication, our youngsters are drawing the wrong conclusion from the alcohol advertising to which they are exposed. We must match alcohol advertising, ad for ad, with good-health and safety messages that give young people a clear, complete and accurate picture.

At the same time, we must stop the marketing of alcohol directly to young people. The laws of our states make it illegal for anyone under the age of 21 to drink alcoholic beverages. Yet, alcohol advertising and promotion on college campuses and at music concerts and athletic events, where young people are present in great numbers, often feature celebrities who have a strong appeal to youth. Our laws carry one message; our attitudes, by allowing alcohol advertising to target youth, carry just the opposite. Does this make sense?

Speaking of things illogical, another mixed message, often encouraged by adults who have the best of intentions, is that it's OK to drink, but it's not OK to drink and *drive*. High school safety clubs often subscribe to this confusing notion. They urge teens to name a "designated driver"—one young driver in the group who will abstain for the evening so that the others can drink "safely". The designated driver is on the honor system (which makes this scheme pretty shakey to begin with) to consume no alcoholic beverages so that he or she can drive the other intoxicated party-goers home.

I don't know where teens or their parents got the idea that auto crashes are the only danger associated with drinking, but I want them to know that alcohol use can bring with it some very serious troubles—at home, at school and with the police. Experts have observed that young people who consume alcohol to be "social" are not developing the normal inter-personal skills needed to have healthy relationships.

Another approach to saving young lives that tends to obscure the problem behind the problem is the "safe ride" program, now popular in many schools and communities, that allows teens to drink as much as they want, then make a telephone call for a free ride home with sober teens or taxi drivers, no questions asked. If the young recipients of this service are really lucky, their parents will be asleep, and they can pass out safely in their own beds . . . with no one the wiser, no questions asked.

We must stop sending conflicting messages to teenagers. While there is no doubt that "safe ride" and "designated driver" programs have saved lives, we must make it clear to our young people that only by obeying the laws regarding alcohol consumption by their age group can they guarantee their own safety and wellbeing.

It's a tough spot for a parent to be in, but as adults with the responsibility for protecting youth, we have to realize that we cannot condone misguided measures that enable high school and college students under 21 to drink any more than we can condone alcohol advertising and marketing that is aimed at our children.

The alcohol message, for teens and adults, alike, can be clearly and simply stated. No one, of any age, should ever drink or drive. Young people under 21 should not drink. People over 21 should weigh the decision to drink carefully, and if they decide to drink, they should do so in moderation and only in low-risk situations. Alcohol, we must all remember, is the number one drug of abuse in America.

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